

FIRE: Forum for International Research in Education

Volume 3

Issue 2 *Inclusion not Exclusion: Comparative
Educational Perspectives at the Heart of Sustainable
Development in the Gulf States*

Article 1

2016

Inclusion Not Exclusion: Comparative Educational Perspectives at the Heart of Sustainable Development in the Gulf States

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Recommended Citation

Sanderson, K., Ridge, N. Y., Kippels, S. M., & Lefebvre, E. (2016). Inclusion Not Exclusion: Comparative Educational Perspectives at the Heart of Sustainable Development in the Gulf States. *FIRE: Forum for International Research in Education*, 3(2). <http://dx.doi.org/10.18275/fire201603021126>

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Inclusion Not Exclusion: Comparative Educational Perspectives at the Heart of Sustainable Development in the Gulf States

Abstract

Welcome to this special edition of *FIRE: Forum for International Research in Education*. This issue celebrates the rich variety of research brought together at the 6th Annual Gulf Comparative Education Society (GCES) Symposium in April 2015. Hosted by Middlesex University at their Dubai campus, the symposium was an opportunity to share and critically discuss matters related to comparative and educational research in a region where opportunities for such activities can be challenging to access. Speakers from Kuwait to Oman came together, and in the form of the conference found both a voice and a support network. The richness of this meeting of minds has been captured in part through this special edition. Building on the quality of research that *FIRE* has become recognized for, we hope you will find the content of this issue interesting, thought provoking, and even controversial, as all good research should be. Above all, we hope it inspires even more academics from within this region to come forward and participate in the debate at future GCES conferences.

Keywords

Education, Middle East, Gulf

INCLUSION NOT EXCLUSION: COMPARATIVE EDUCATIONAL PERSPECTIVES AT THE HEART OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN THE GULF STATES

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Introduction

Sustainability is a buzz word in many areas of our lives today, but what does this mean in the developing world? The Gulf States, using wealth derived primarily from oil and gas revenues, are transforming their countries from desert oases into ultra-modern cities (Foley, 2010). This change has been witnessed within only three generations. A key question surrounding this rapid development is if sustainability is possible with regard to human capital. Education and its impact occupy a vital space within this question (Donn & Al Manthri, 2010). This special issue of *FIRE: Forum for International Research in Education* draws from the 6th Annual Gulf Comparative Education Society (GCES) Symposium that was held in April 2015 and hosted by Middlesex University at their Dubai campus.

This event provided a unique platform for a variety of academics from around the Gulf to come together and share their research, exploring many educational issues unique to the region. The most important aspect of the conference was the opportunity it provided to the delegates to have a voice. A principle tenet of comparative education research is that it encourages the investigation of local educational issues in light of international, national, and regional policies

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and practices. Educational research from this region of the world is often limited in scope and difficult to access. The greatest achievement of the conference has been the opportunity to assemble some of the key papers for this publication and offer an even more expansive platform for the research. Building on the quality of research *FIRE* has become recognized for, we hope you will find the content of this issue of interesting and thought provoking. Above all, we hope it inspires even more academics from within this region to come forward and participate in the debate at future GCES conferences.

This issue explores education inside three Gulf states, namely Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Each has a unique local culture with strong traditions and a relatively recent history of development and modernization, with the UAE only celebrating its 45th year as a nation in 2016. This rapid growth and development has resulted in increasing numbers of expatriate families relocating to these countries to support the development over the last thirty years (Naithani & Jha, 2010). The resultant changing cultural dynamic has produced unique populations and subsequently unique educational opportunities and challenges. The papers in this special issue highlight some of these key conversations.

Ridge, Shami, and Kippels introduce us to this complexity through their insightful investigation into education and expatriation. Student mobility and the government's dependency on private enterprise to supply education in two countries, Qatar and the UAE, are clearly documented, as are many of the unique challenges this dynamic brings. This serves as an ideal introduction to the education landscape. The need to educate all citizens, whatever their social economic condition may be, and the need for private enterprise to ensure shareholder return on investments appear to be at odds. Only the children of local families, Qatari and Emirati, are granted free, government-paid education, so what of the children from other nationalities? Ridge et al. explore the option of non-profit education and ask whether this can be the solution.

Due to the length of time education has been considered a right for all, exploring how the rise of education has impacted the local population is something that the developed world now struggles to conceptualize. However, in Saudi Arabia, the rise of educational development, its policies and facilities, is something that has been observed primarily over the last three decades. Researchers who are fortunate enough to gain access to this secretive society are able to document the impact educational development is having on its citizens firsthand. Though a concise study, Sim introduces us to the nuances of the development of higher education in this unique and rapidly developing nation.

Linking to the goal of education supporting the development of a country's human capital, Daleure connects us to the challenges Emirati nationals face when entering the workforce and the tension between public and private employment. The UAE government encourages all of its citizens, men and women, to participate in the labor force. However, the need to generate profit and the more competitive nature of the private work environment makes working in the public sector more attractive than the private sector to nationals. Daleure explores the subsequent tensions this generates and the frustration that the government and the workforce encounter when trying to meet these goals and aspirations.

Rensimer returns us to the concept of international education and asks us to consider the notion of "international". The UAE has more international degree providers than any other country in the world. What also makes the student body unique in the UAE is the nationality makeup. Where branch campuses normally establish themselves, the majority of students are from that country. However, in the UAE, an estimated 80% residents are expatriates (World Bank, 2014) and in turn university communities are also very international. In fact, the UAE provides a unique

space for the discussion about “international” students when they have resided in the UAE all their lives, yet due to residency rules cannot be permanent resident. The discourse on international students and international university education is analyzed in light of the unique communities in the Gulf region, and particularly for those in the northern emirate of Ras Al Khaimah in the UAE.

Finally, in their article “A Childhood Lost: Children in the 21st Century,” Preedy and Sanderson explore the meaning of childhood within the realms of play and attachment, drawing upon the work of Athey, Brown, Bowlby, Deforges and Abouchaar, and Hattie. The authors focus on parental attitudes and societal expectations in relation to children’s play today. They examine whether the introduction and use of technology and prescriptive toys is limiting children’s development and their attachment with parents in the 21st century. The researchers filmed videos that they used to analyze the differences between a child’s “normal play behavior” with the resources parents provided prior to the study to the child’s behavior following the intervention and the introduction of the activities from their “Parents as Play Partners” module.

What is clear from this small but insightful collection of articles is that the Gulf is a dynamic and evolving region of the world. Consequently, the scope for more focused research on transformation and change is boundless. Thus, the GCES symposium, which served as the stimulus for this special issue, has added to the discourse of development in the region. The articles in this special edition provide insight into areas of research and support greater understanding of the complexity of education in the Gulf.

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Elisabeth Lefebvre is a Post-doctoral Research Associate at the University of Minnesota, where she is working on a longitudinal evaluation of youth livelihoods programs in East Africa. Her scholarship focuses on primary schooling, childhood, and educational history. She has co-published articles on young mothers' experiences of entrepreneurship education programs in Uganda, and on beginning teacher experiences in Zambia. Lefebvre's domestic work includes an ongoing exploration of Teach for America corps members' identity and placement experiences. Elisabeth is currently working on a book proposal based on her dissertation, which is entitled, "What was best for a white child need not be the same as for a dark child": Producing the 'educated African child' in colonial Uganda's schools, 1877-1963.